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SOME FEATURES OF OVID'S STYLE: III. OVID'S
METHODS OF ORDERING AND TRANSITION
IN THE *METAMORPHOSES*

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Given a huge mass of hundreds of stories gathered from many sources, distributed over many lands, assigned in time of action to all ages of the world from the creation down to the poet's own day, stories in numerous instances entirely unrelated to each other in time, place, and circumstance, Ovid had no small task. This task was a twofold one. The first and greatest was of course the retelling, in a new and pleasing manner, of these stories gathered from many sources, often prosily told, and told in various forms and with varying motifs. That Ovid successfully performed this task is attested by the important position assigned by the literary world ever since his time to the *Metamorphoses*. The poem forms a more or less complete manual of classical mythology, and is perhaps the most important source of wonder stories for all writers since Ovid's time. This is the real service which he has done the world, though he himself seems to have based his fame upon the various collections of his amatory poems. Many of these stories may still be obtained from the various sources whence Ovid himself drew them—from Homer, Hesiod, the Greek tragedians, and the later Alexandrian poets. And yet many stories, but for him, would have been entirely lost to us; and all he has so vivified by his strong poetic imagination and his unrivalled arts as a story-teller, that they have come down to us with added freshness and life. Poets and painters without number have drawn inspiration and illustrative material from him.

On this point Root in his *Classical Mythology in Shakespeare* says:

It was Ovid, the brilliant, the sensuous, least spiritual of the ancients, who became the poet's poet, the painter's poet, the dominant influence in the

art of the Renaissance. It is the mythology of Ovid that crowds the pages of Boccaccio and Chaucer; it is the divinities of Ovid that elbow the virgins and saints in every picture gallery of Europe; it was to Ovid that Shakespeare turned for the classical allusions which the taste of the sixteenth century demanded in its literature. . . . Throughout, the influence of Ovid is at least four times as great as that of Virgil; the whole character of Shakespeare's mythology is essentially Ovidian.

A wide survey of later English and American poets shows a constant reference to the myths as Ovid tells them, while all the handbooks of classical mythology are largely made up of free translations from the *Metamorphoses*.

While this task of the telling of the stories was of course the larger task, the arrangement of these in some natural and appropriate order, and the pleasing transition or modulation from one theme to another, although a relatively smaller task than the telling, was really one of no little difficulty.

Let us put ourselves in Ovid's place. Let us imagine ourselves at a table on which lie piled a confused mass of heterogeneous tales gleaned from many sources, relating to various times and places. In what order shall we arrange them? How relate them to one another so that the whole narrative may flow on pleasingly and without break? This last principle Ovid seems to have adopted as his *sine qua non*. Of course he might have chosen the *Classical Dictionary* method, and arranged the several tales in the alphabetical order of the names of the heroes and heroines of the stories; or he might have arranged them in groups with no particular method of arrangement either between groups or within groups, and with no attempt at logical transition, as did Hyginus in his *Fabulae*. But both of these methods are outside of Ovid's *sine qua non*. The whole collection must be one coherent story. Somehow or other, the parts must hang together.

Excluding methods that do not conform to this essential principle, we turn first to the *chronological method* of arrangement as the easiest and most obvious as well as the most natural. Epic writers generally have followed this method on the whole, though in notable instances, as for instance the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, *Paradise Lost*, the author has started at some point well on in the course of the story and has used some dramatic device, after he has well

begun, with which to bring up the earlier action of the tale. But these epic writers had on the whole only one tale to tell, the action of which, unfolding in chronological order, could easily and most naturally be related in that order; while Ovid had hundreds of tales the connection between which was for the most part far to seek and far subtler than the mere fact of chronological sequence would indicate. Of course there *is* the element of time and time sequence in the stories of mythology and tradition. The account of the creation naturally precedes the fall of man, and such is Ovid's order. Then follows the destruction of the world by flood, the miraculous repopling of the earth and the spontaneous generation of lower animal life. But here Ovid finds himself estopped and in need of some other than the chronological method of tale ordering. In general, also, certain groups of stories would precede other groups, for example, the stories grouped around the Argonautic Expedition in the time of Jason and the heroes of his generation would naturally come before the great group of stories of the time immediately leading up to and during the Trojan War, which was fought by the sons of those heroes. And these would be followed, of course, by the adventures of the Greek and Trojan leaders after the fall of Troy. But, as we have said above, the chronological method has its limitations, and the poet must supplement this by recourse to other devices of transition.

A second method of ordering and transition frequently employed by Ovid is what we may call the *geographical* or *itinerary method*. This is well illustrated in v. 250 ff. We have just finished the Perseus-Gorgon's-Head-Andromeda series of stories. The next important group is the Proserpina-Ceres-Arethusa group. There is no natural connection of chronological or other sequence. A bridge of some sort must be found. Ovid's bridge is rather flimsy, we must admit, but it is a bridge, and under the poet's skillful guidance we find ourselves across without any unpleasant shock or consciousness of break in the narrative. Ovid's bridge is the simple statement: "*During all this time Minerva had been Perseus' companion*" (though we had been likely to have forgotten it). "But now she leaves him and goes to Mt. Helicon, the home of the Muses." With this change of place we may have anything

happen or any story told that the poet may desire. And we soon find ourselves listening along with Minerva to the tale of Ceres and Proserpina, and other interestingly interwoven minor stories, as told by the muse Calliope.

So in xi. 85 ff., the transformation from the Orpheus group to the Midas group is made by this same simple geographic device. The Thracian women have just torn Orpheus in pieces. Bacchus punishes these women by changing them into trees. *He also punishes the land by leaving it for Tmolus and Pactolus in Phrygia.* This river Pactolus was not yet a golden stream—and now we are all set for the stories of the Midas group.

The best illustration of this geographical method is where the story is carried over an extensive itinerary, as in the case of the Aeneas stories while he wanders in exile after the fall of Troy. Ovid, unlike Vergil, uses this itinerary as a mere thread on which to hang the tales associated with the places at which the hero touches. Vergil tells few such stories by the way. He is not writing for the sake of entertainment. The purpose of his great poem is to show how the Trojan exiles were divinely guided throughout their wanderings, that at last, in the promised land of Italy, a great foreordained nation might be founded. Ovid is silent, or nearly so, on points which Vergil emphasizes; and he tells at great length incidents which Vergil merely mentions or omits altogether. Ovid's purpose is to entertain; Vergil's, to inspire.

A third device which cleverly dispenses with all need of ordering or modulation, and which often serves the poet, is what we may call the *collective* or *bracketing method*. This device is well known to the student of general literature, who will recall Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Longfellow's *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, and other such collections of tales. The device consists simply in having a group of people traveling together, or in quarantine, or storm-stayed, passing the time by telling stories. These stories need have no connection in time or place, and no apologies need be offered for lack of a handle for purposes of introduction. Ovid finds this device a "very present help in time of trouble" and has frequent recourse to it.

A good illustration of the collective method is found at the beginning of the fourth book. The third ended with the statement: "Taught by such a warning (i.e., the fate of Pentheus), the Thebans throng the new god's (Bacchus') sacred rites and bow down before his shrines." Book four begins: "But not Minyas' daughter, Alcithoë." She and her sisters remain ostentatiously at home and beguile the time by telling stories. Of these stories, eight are "read by title" and three are told at length. These last are "Pyramus and Thisbe," "Apollo and Clytie," and "Salmacis and Hermaphroditus." We give a brief résumé of this porch scene to show how cleverly the poet has here introduced and disposed of a considerable number of stories. One of the sisters begins. What story shall she tell? Shall it be of Dercetis of Babylon? or of her daughter? or how a certain nymph turned some boys into fish? or about the mulberry tree? Yes, about the mulberry tree, that is, the Pyramus and Thisbe story. The next sister tells of how the sun-god tricked Mars and Venus and how Venus got revenge, this last being the story of Apollo and Clytie. Then a third takes her turn. "I will pass by the well-known love of Daphnis, nor will I tell how once Sithon lived of changing sex, how Celmis was once the friend of Jove, how the Curetes sprang from showers, how Crocus and Smilax were changed into flowers. I will pass by all these and charm you with a new story, the story of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus," which she proceeds to tell at length.

Instead of being told in words, stories may be represented as told in picture form. So in the contest in weaving between Minerva and Arachne (vi. 70-128). In the brief space of fifty-eight lines, fifteen minor stories are brought into passing notice. Pallas weaves into her picture: (1) the council of the gods on the Hill of Mars concerning the name of the land; (2) Rhodope and Haemus, mortals changed to mountains for irreverence toward the gods; (3) Pygmaean queen, changed to a crane; (4) Antigone, changed into a stork; (5) Cinyras, bereft of his daughters, who were changed into marble.

Arachne pictures: (1) Europa, deceived by Jove in the guise of a bull; (2) Asterie and Jove in the form of an eagle; (3) Leda

and the swan; (4) Antiope and Jove in satyr form; (5) Alcmena and Jove as Amphitryon; (6) Danaë and the golden shower; (7) Aegina and the flame; (8) Mnemosyne and the shepherd; (9) Deo's daughter and the snake; (10) six amours of Neptune.

Another excellent collection of stories, told at considerable length, is to be found in the latter half of the eighth book, running over into the ninth. These might very properly be styled "Tales of a Wayside Inn," for Ovid very picturesquely sets the scene for them in the house of the river-god, Acheloüs, on the bank of the (temporarily) swollen stream of that god. Here Theseus, returning to Athens from the Calydonian boar hunt, is stopped from further journeying and is entertained for the night along with other travelers; and of course, besides the generous feasting and drinking, the chief entertainment is story-telling. The conversation is started by Theseus, who questions Acheloüs as to certain islands in the stream. He learns that these were once five nymphs changed by Diana into this form. This story is received with reverent credulity by all save the scoffer, Pirithoüs, Ixion's son, who will not concede that the gods have power to work such changes. In answer to this scoffing, old Lelex tells the story of Philemon and Baucis, one of the most beautiful and best-told tales in all the *Metamorphoses*. Then Acheloüs tells of the form-changing power of Proteus, and of Erysichthon's daughter (this story contains the famous description of personified Famine), and of his own similar power. This leads to the story of the great fight of Acheloüs and Hercules for the possession of Deianira. On the completion of this last story, Ovid rounds out the scene as skillfully as at the beginning: "The dawn came on, and, as the first rays of the sun smote the mountain tops, the youths took their departure."

In x. 143-739, the collective or bracketing device is the song of Orpheus as he sat amidst the grove which his music had gathered round him. "I would sing of boys beloved by gods and of maidens inflamed by unnatural love." With this introduction by the bard, there follows a series of stories on the themes just mentioned: (1) of Jupiter and the rape of Ganymede; (2) of Phoebus and Hyacinthus; (3) of Venus' vengeance on the Propoetides; (4) of Pygmalion and the statue. The child of this union was a daughter,

Paphos, and Cinyras was her son; hence the story (5) of the unnatural love of his daughter, Myrrha, for her father. Her child was Adonis; hence the story (6) of Venus and Adonis.

Akin to the method last discussed in purpose and effect is the method of imbedding one story in another, or the *story by the way plan*. This need have no relation to the main tale, but needs only some reason for introduction. This reason may be quite outside of any logical connection with the story's setting. So in i. 689-712, in the midst of the main tale of how Mercury, at the request of Jupiter, undertakes the destruction of Argus, we have the winged god singing of Pan and Syrinx that he may lull the watchful eyes all to slumber. The Pan-Syrinx story does not belong here. It does not have to belong. Any story that is new and interesting enough to beguile the suspicious Argus would do as well. So also Arethusa's story is told within the story of Ceres (v. 572-661); so, imbedded in the long sequel story of Ceyx and Alcyone, is the story of the visit of Juno to the house of Sleep and the remarkable description of that personified being; so, in the tale of the visit of Aeneas to Anius, there is engraved on a cup presented by the old priest to his guest a picture story of the great pestilence and drought in Thebes (xiii. 675-704); and so also in the midst of the story of the wooing of Scylla by Glaucus we find the god's own tale of his transformation from a mortal to a sea-god (xiii. 917-65).

Somewhat similar to the geographical method of effecting transition from group to group of stories (for we readily see that for the most part Ovid frequently and indeed habitually groups his stories about some important nucleus of incident), in which the change is made simply by having some actor in the previous tale change his location, is what may be called the *coincidental or contemporary action method*. This does not excite much admiration because of its ingenuity, for it is too easy. When the poet has reached an *impasse* in his narrative, he has only to wave the magic word *interea* or introduce a *dum*-clause, and the deed is done—the transition is made. A few cases in point will illustrate this method.

In iii. 253-315, the stories of the woes of the house of Cadmus have ended, including the tales of Actaeon and of Semele. In the

next tale the blind old Tiresias appears as a character. But why blind? The frequent formula *dumque ea per terras geruntur*, "now while these things were happening on the earth," allows the poet to go on to tell how it chanced that Jove had a trifling dispute with Juno, how they referred the decision to Tiresias, how the latter decided in favor of Jupiter and was smitten with blindness by Juno for his pains. Obviously any other happening in heaven could just as easily have been introduced by the above-quoted formula; and the joints of the narrative creak more loudly at such a point than under any other method of transition. Nevertheless the poet makes much use, too much use, of this device. A similar coincidental transition and one very typical in Ovid is found in xi. 410: *Interea turbatus pectora Ceyx*, "meanwhile Ceyx, much perturbed in soul, decides to go to the Delphic Oracle," etc.

These methods of transition already described and illustrated, these welding devices, these modulations (to use the musicians' term) from key to key and from theme to theme, all working to the end of preserving an unbroken narrative, have helped the poet in the telling of a large number of his stories. But his chief reliance is upon still another method, a method which taxes more severely the story-teller's art and results in greater pleasure to the reader. We may call this the *stepping-stone method*, or transition by suggestion. This suggestion is oftentimes quite natural, and many times far-fetched; but even in the latter case, the reader must admire the art and ingenuity by which the poet invariably makes his connection and lands his reader safely and comfortably in the new story. We may rub our eyes and wonder how we got here, but here we are without jar or stoppage.

Between the creation-fall-flood stories to the Apollo-Daphne story there would seem to be a great gulf fixed. But note the stepping-stones: (1) After the flood, animals reappeared upon the earth by spontaneous generation from its slime. (2) Among these animals was the huge Python-snake. (3) This monster Apollo slew by his arrows and was filled with pride so great that he established the Pythian Games in celebration of his prowess. (4) At these games the prize to the victor was an oaken garland (but later, laurel). (5) Why did Apollo later adopt the laurel as his

tree? And now we are quite ready for the Apollo-Daphne story (i. 452-567).

But what connection can there be between this and the Jupiter-Io myth? Ovid can find one: (1) Daphne, according to the tale just told, was changed to a laurel (*δάφνη*) tree, and so was lost to her father, the Peneus river-god, who mourned her disappearance. (2) The other river-gods all came to condole with Peneus. (3) *Inachus only did not come*. (4) Why? Inachus had troubles of his own, for his daughter, also, was missing, since she had been changed into a heifer, as narrated in the Jupiter-Io tale (588-621). This is all as easy and comfortable for us as bridging a wide chasm while we sleep peacefully in our Pullman berth.

This "Inachus only did not come" formula is a pet device of Ovid, and he uses it often and with telling effect. After a group of Bacchus stories, ending with the change of Cadmus and his wife into serpents, we read (iv. 604 ff.): "Both in their new form found great comfort in their grandson, Bacchus, now worshiped throughout India and Greece by all—*except by Acrisius*, who did not acknowledge Bacchus as the son of Jove, nor did he admit that his grandson, Perseus, was the son of Jove." (Note the perilous leap between these last two stones!) Thus is introduced the series of Perseus myths.

From the loss of Thebes in the destruction of her whole royal house, Amphion, Niobe, and all their sons and daughters, the narrative melts unbrokenly into the utterly unrelated Tereus-Procne-Philomela tales by this same device. "All the neighboring cities now sent their kings to offer sympathy to Thebes. *Athens alone did nothing*, being besieged by barbaric hordes from overseas." Tereus, king of Thrace, raises this siege and obtains Pandion's daughter, Procne, as his wife. This leads easily to the whole dire tale that follows (vi. 424 ff.). So also the absence of Aeson from the enthusiastic welcome home which the Thessalians gave to the returning Argonautic heroes, which absence was caused by his extreme age and consequent weakness, introduces the story of the rejuvenation of the old man by the magic of Medea (vii. 164-293); and Silenus' absence from the company of Bacchus gives an opening for the succeeding Midas stories (xi. 89-99). And finally, to cite one more instance of this same kind, it is the absence

of Paris from the funeral rites at the cenotaph of his brother, Aesacus, which serves to introduce the opening events of the Trojan War (xii. 1 ff.)

I have described the various methods of transition, drawing the illustrations from here and there, in the first thirteen books. I will now outline the last two books, showing the operation of the varying methods of transition by which the poet comes to the end of his great task. Ovid passes over from tales of Greece and Phrygia, with which the major part of his work is concerned, to tales in connection with early Italian and Roman history by means of the journeys of Aeneas and his final coming to his promised land. His arrival at the Sicilian straits, whose dangerous waters were infested by Scylla and Charybdis, suggests the story of how Scylla, once a beautiful maiden, was changed into the dog-girt monster which thereafter dwelt there as a deadly menace to sailors. The telling of this and other stories by the way fills xiii. 675 to xiv. 74.

Then follows (xiv. 75-440), in a very condensed form, the story of Aeneas and Dido, an account of the Cumaeen Sibyl much fuller than Vergil's, the briefest mention of Aeneas' visit to the underworld, a much expanded story of the rescued Achaemenides and his experiences among the Cyclops.

The chance meeting at Caieta with Macareus, a companion of Ulysses, who had stayed behind at that place wearied with his long wanderings, gives Ovid a chance to tell, through this man's narrative, the story of the adventures of Ulysses and his men, first among the Laestrygonians, and afterward at the court of Circe. There (a story within a story) a nymph of the court tells Macareus the Italian myth of how Picus, son of Saturn, and one of the most ancient kings of the Ausonian country, had been beloved by Circe, had spurned her love, and had, in consequence, been changed by her into a woodpecker. This story is told at great length, and in Ovid's best style.

The transition here is exceedingly abrupt, and the succeeding events of Aeneas' adventures hurriedly recounted:

Macareus had finished his story; and Aeneas' nurse, buried in a marble urn, had a brief epitaph carved on her tomb:

"Here me, Caieta, snatched from Grecian flames,
My pious son consumed with fitting fire."

Ovid gives less than two lines to the fleet's arrival at the Tiber's mouth, an event which stirs Vergil (*Aeneid* vii. 25-36) to a burst of enthusiasm and lively description. The struggle of Turnus to retain his favored position in Italy, the hurried preparations on both sides, the ebb and flow of the war, the final duel between the leaders, which are Vergil's chief concern, and with which for the most part he fills the last six books of his greatest poem—these are of no interest to Ovid except as they serve to introduce certain tales which appeal to his love of a good story and which he tells with eager interest. Thus the reply of Diomede to the envoys of Turnus, who sought his aid against the Trojans, tells at length the adventures and sufferings of the hero and his followers after the fall of Troy. Diomede has had enough of fighting those whom Venus protects. He will fight no more (401-530).

We have also the metamorphosis of the Trojans' feet into sea-nymphs (530-65).

After harmony had been restored between the warring powers of heaven, and Aeneas had slain his foe, the story as Vergil tells it is at an end. But Ovid goes on, as did Mapheus Vegius, hundreds of years later in his *Supplementum Aeneidos*, to tell the sequel. The drowning of Aeneas in an obscure stream, an event darkly predicted in Dido's curse (*Aeneid* iv. 620), and his subsequent deification, are fully described by Ovid (566-608).

Follows a brief and jumbled recounting of the Alban kings to the time of Proca, in whose reign lived the beautiful wood-nymph, Pomona. This gives opportunity for the telling of the charming love idyl of Pomona and the Italian deity, Vertumnus (623-771). A tale within this tale is told of Iphis and Anaxarete, the purpose of which is to warn proud maidens of hard-heartedness toward their lovers.

A hurried résumé is given of events leading to the birth of Romulus, the founding of Rome, the struggle with the Sabines, expanding to a fuller account of the translation and deification of the king and of his wife, Hersilia.

Numa, chosen to succeed Romulus, "not content with knowing the usages of the Sabine race, seeks to know what is nature's general law." Accordingly, he leaves his native Cures and travels from

place to place, coming at last to Crotona. Here he becomes a student of Pythagorean philosophy, which Ovid pauses to expound at length (xv. 75-478). The poet has indeed prepared for this unprecedented departure from his passion for story-telling, first by the casual remark above as to Numa's desire "to know what is nature's general law," and again by mention of Crotona, which, by the geographical method, makes easy transition to the account of the teachings of the Samian philosopher who was dwelling there. But even so, this long philosophical digression remains unexcused if not unexplained. We can only surmise that Ovid's own desire to dabble in philosophy (which, however, he has not disclosed elsewhere to any observable degree) led him to this excursus.

The later death of Numa, and the inordinate grief of his wife, Egeria, give opportunity for the story of Hippolytus, who appears and attempts to comfort her. He tells of his own sufferings and death (as related in Greek tragedy), his restoration to life by Aesculapius, and his settlement by the favor of Diana in Italy, where, with wholly changed appearance, he is known by the name of Virbius. But Egeria was inconsolable. She melted away in tears and was changed to a cool spring of water (479-546).

In the succeeding passage we find illustrated a method of transition hardly referable to any one of the methods described earlier in this paper. It may be classified under the method of transition by suggestion, but the suggestion is balder and more artificial than any previously mentioned. We read (552 ff.): "This strange event struck the nymphs with wonder; and the son of the Amazon (Virbius) *was no less amazed than was the Tyrrhene plowman*, when he saw in his field a clod, moving of its own accord and with no one touching it, then taking on the form of a man, and finally opening its new-made mouth to speak the things that are to be. *And no less amazed than was Romulus* when he saw his spear-shaft suddenly putting forth leaves; *or than was Cipus* when in a clear stream he saw horns spring from his head." Here by the slender thread of similar amazement, we have drawn in three stories, the first two briefly told, the third at considerable length.

At last we come to a place where Ovid frankly discards all methods of transition, and, without modulation of any kind, tells in full detail the story of the coming of Aesculapius to Rome in serpent form. This is not, indeed, without introduction, but it is without any attempt at relating this to the tale just told. Ovid's device is an appeal to the muses as at the beginning of his book of tales:

Reveal to me now, o Muses, ye ever helpful divinities of bards (for you know, nor has far-stretching time dimmed your memory), whence did the island bathed by the deep Tiber bring Coronis' son and set him midst the deities of Rome [622-744].

But how shall the poet bridge the centuries between that far-off mythical tale, and the apotheosis of Caesar in his own time? For this is the concluding change in this long tale of changes. If Ovid's powers of invention failed as described just above, they revive triumphantly at this last call. Without hesitation, Ovid takes the long leap in this fashion: "Now he (Aesculapius) came to our shrines as a god from a foreign land; *but Caesar is a god in his own city.*" And with this ingenious warrant of introduction, Ovid gives the rest of his book (745-870) to the death and deification of Julius Caesar.

But not quite the rest. There remains, and this time with no need of transition, the poet's heartfelt relief from his long toil and his exultation that he has won that immortality of fame for which poets, and lesser mortals too, are ever striving.

And now my work is done, which neither the wrath of Jove, nor fire, nor sword, nor the gnawing tooth of time shall ever be able to undo. When it will, let that day come which has no power save over this mortal frame, and end the span of my uncertain years. Still, in my better part, I shall be borne immortal far beyond the lofty stars and I shall have an undying name. Wherever Rome's power extends over the conquered world, I shall have mention on the lips of men, and if the prophecies of bards have any truth, through all the ages shall I live in fame.